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**TO:** Superintendents of Public Schools  
District Superintendents of BOCES  
Principals of Charter and Other Public Schools  
Principals of Nonpublic Schools

**FROM:** Ken Slentz   
Deputy Commissioner, Office of P-12 Education

**SUBJECT:** Implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards

This document provides an update on New York's implementation of the Common Core State Standards. It reviews the work done over the past four years by the Department and educators across the state to implement the commitment of the Board of Regents to align New York's standards, instruction, and assessment with college and career readiness. The document consolidates content drawn from New York State's Race to the Top application, New York State's Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) Waiver application, various Board of Regents items and presentations, Department publications, and resources available on EngageNY.org.

### **Ensuring College- and Career-Readiness for All**

New York's graduation rates have increased in recent years. Of the public school students who entered ninth grade in 2007, 74% percent graduated four years later. However, the good news about the rise in the graduation rate does not tell a full story. Despite New York State having some of the most successful individual districts and individual schools in the country, too many of our students do not graduate, and too many of our high school graduates find themselves taking remedial courses when they enter college. These students pay college tuition for learning that should have happened in high school, and students who take remedial courses in college are less likely to finish their studies. Students who do not complete post-secondary education often have to accept jobs that do not provide a family-supporting wage and do not offer potential for meaningful advancement. This outcome hurts us all – our children, our families, New York, and the nation. When our educational system fails to prepare so many of our children for success in college and their careers, we are all accountable. Reform cannot be delayed.

Over the past decade, the Board of Regents and the New York State Education Department (NYSED) have increased the rigor represented by a high school diploma by making changes to the learning standards, credit requirements, and assessment performance standards. Beginning with students who entered ninth grade in 2005, the number of exams on which general education students were required to earn at least 65 was increased each year. General education students entering ninth grade in 2008 or later must now earn a score of at least 65 on all required Regents Exams.<sup>1</sup> The Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation is available for students who completed additional credits and course sequences and score at least 65 on up to nine Regents Exams. These were significant and important increases in rigor from what had been required of high school students previously.

Although we have raised expectations for what students must know and be able to do upon graduation, student performance has not risen sufficiently to meet those expectations. We need more accurate measures of student progress. In July 2010, SED revised (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pressRelease/20100728/home.html>) Grades 3-8 English language arts (ELA) and math cut scores, and as a result, our proficiency rates moved closer to the State's proficiency rates on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a representative assessment of what U.S. students know and can do in core subjects. This more accurate picture showed that only 53% of students in English language arts (ELA) and 61% in math met the State's 2005 ELA and math standards, down from 77% and 86% the year prior based on the old cut scores. However, this was still not a completely accurate picture of our students' performance against a trajectory that demonstrates college- and career-readiness; the increase in cut scores was an interim step as we got closer to implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

This year, as you know, we are taking the next step and designing our Grades 3-8 ELA and math assessments to measure the knowledge and skills students need at each grade level to achieve college and career readiness. The Common Core State Standards, adopted by 45 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity, were developed by mapping backwards from college and career success, internationally benchmarked, and informed by research.<sup>2</sup> As such, the Common Core State Standards and accompanying assessments that measure student progress on these standards are closely aligned with the knowledge and skills measured by the NAEP.<sup>3</sup> New York State educators and parents will now have an accurate indicator of how our students are performing and their progress toward college- and career-readiness.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Students who successfully appeal one Regents examination score within three points of the 65 passing score and who meet specific criteria set forth in regulation will earn a Regents diploma; students who successfully appeal two Regents examination scores will earn a local diploma (8 NYCRR §100.5[d][7]).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, *Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards* at [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://achieve.org/CCSS-ELA-NAEP-Framework> and <http://www.achieve.org/files/CCSSMathandNAEP.pdf>

The need for this change is readily apparent. In June 2011, SED released (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pressRelease/20110614/home.html>) for the first time “aspirational performance measures,” or New York graduation rates based on college- and career-readiness performance standards: Only 30.9% of the 2006 cohort graduated with a Regents diploma with Advanced Designation, and only 36.7% of the graduates in the cohort scored at least 75 and 80 on their English and math Regents exams, respectively (these Regents exam cut scores are considered to be the minimum necessary for college-readiness). These high school results are consistent with New York’s elementary and middle school scores on NAEP: for the 2011 school year, only 30% and 35% of New York’s Grade 8 students scored proficient on the NAEP in math and reading, respectively. These sobering high school outcomes make it even more important that our new Grades 3-8 ELA and math Common Core assessments provide educators and parents with early indicators of the trajectory to college- and career-readiness long before our students enter high school.

### **Rigorous Curriculum and Instruction**

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) allow States to share a common definition of readiness at each grade level by working backward based on the demands of college and careers. This progression of student readiness is one of the central principles of the standards. If students are to graduate high school fully prepared, they must meet the benchmarks set by the Common Core – at every grade and in every classroom. It is to these benchmarks that we must now teach. It is student mastery of these benchmarks that we must now assess.

The New York State Board of Regents committed to the CCSS in January 2010 and formally adopted the CCSS for English Language Arts & Literacy and Mathematics in July 2010. In December 2010, the Board of Regents announced that student progress on these standards will be measured in Grades 3-8 through State assessments beginning in the 2012-13 school year (<http://engage.ny.org/resource/common-core-implementation-timeline>) (student progress on the CCSS in high school will be measured by State tests that will be phased in beginning in June 2014). At the same time, the Board of Regents required NYSED to ensure that newly certified New York State teachers will be ready to deliver instruction aligned to the Common Core (including implementation of new certification assessment requirements in Spring 2014). In January 2011, NYSED began offering explicit guidance regarding the changes that should occur in each district, school, and classroom in order to ensure that teachers and students are prepared for these changes. The Network Teams Institutes, a statewide professional development initiative for New York State educators, began in summer 2011 along with the launch of the EngageNY.org professional development website. Through the institutes, educators and professional developers are consistently exposed to the latest resources, supports, and guidance from NYSED on Common Core implementation. In summer and fall 2012, NYSED released Grades 3-8 Common Core sample questions and test guides to help teachers adjust their practice in ways that support the Common Core. Statewide ELA and Math Common Core assessment rubric and scoring training sessions began in winter 2013.

The Common Core demands significant shifts (<http://engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts>) in the way we teach. Each teacher must adopt these shifts so that students remain on track toward success in college and careers. These shifts in instruction will require that many teachers learn new skills and reflect upon and evolve in their classroom practices. For example, ELA teachers must ensure a balance of literature and informational text and a dramatic increase in the amount of time and attention students spend in evidence-based analysis of what they are reading. In math, teachers must spend more time on less content, driving toward true mastery through a new level of fluency with math facts as well as a new comfort with real world application.

Local educational agencies have clear decision-making authority over the adoption of curriculum materials and instructional practices. NYSED has used its federal Race to the Top (RTTT) funds to support these local efforts by providing tools, maps, modules, (<http://engageny.org/common-core-curriculum>) scaffolds, and aligned professional development (<http://engageny.org/network-teams>). We update EngageNY.org (<http://engageny.org>) with new materials regularly. Overall, local schools and districts, on their own and in collaboration with their BOCES and other regional partners, have worked hard to implement the changes required by the Common Core.

### **Assessing What Students Know and Can Do**

Students learn best when motivated by great teachers delivering engaging instruction guided by rigorous curriculum. Effective teachers determine what each student knows and can do on an ongoing basis and use this information to adjust instruction accordingly. Student progress is assessed each day in the classroom by teachers, perhaps every few weeks or months by the district, once a year by the State, and every few years nationally via sampling. This information about students is used in various ways, in a continuous feedback loop, to inform all levels of educational policy and practice – from what a teacher focuses on in the next lesson to how federal and state funds are allocated.

Assessing what students know and can do with the same tests under standardized conditions throughout the State is a necessary supplement to what great teachers do every day in their classroom. Statewide assessment results are the only way to provide comprehensive information on whether **all** students in New York State are achieving **equally high standards**; identify achievement gaps (students who are excelling or falling behind their peers in other parts of the state); and identify local, regional, and statewide policies that could be expanded, replicated, or adjusted to help ensure that our schools and teachers are as effective as possible in helping students achieve their full potential.

Research has consistently demonstrated that students perform best on local, regional, statewide, or national assessments when they have a great teacher delivering high quality instruction aligned to rigorous standards.<sup>4</sup> Rote test prep practices are incompatible with highly effective teaching and lead to lower student performance.<sup>5</sup>

### **Changes to NYSED Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests: Assessing the Common Core**

Beginning with the current school year (2012-13), NYSED is re-designing its assessment program (<http://engageny.org/resource/common-core-implementation-timeline>) to measure what students know and can do relative to the grade-level Common Core State Standards. Specific changes to the Grades 3-8 ELA and math tests (<http://engageny.org/resource/test-guides-for-english-language-arts-and-mathematics>) include the following:

1. **Increases in Rigor** – The CCSS are back-mapped, grade-by-grade, from college and career readiness. Many of the questions on the Common Core assessments are more advanced and complex than those found on prior assessments that measured prior grade-level standards.
2. **Focus on Text** – To answer ELA questions correctly, students will need to read and analyze each passage completely and closely, and be prepared to carefully consider responses to multiple-choice questions. For constructed response items, students will need to answer questions with evidence gathered from rigorous literature and informational texts. Some texts will express an author's point of view, with which not all readers will agree.
3. **Depth of Math** – Students will be expected to understand math conceptually, use prerequisite skills with grade-level math facts, and solve math problems rooted in the real-world, deciding for themselves which formulas and tools (such as protractors or rulers) to use.

### **Accountability**

As described above, the first New York State tests to measure student progress on the Common Core will be administered in April 2013 for Grades 3-8 ELA and math. Because the new tests are designed to determine whether students are meeting a higher performance standard, we expect that fewer students will perform at or above grade-level Common Core expectations (i.e., proficiency) than was the case with prior-year State tests.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that the statewide percentage of students at or above grade level **expectations** on the new tests will generally be consistent with student

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<sup>4</sup>See, for example, <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/authentic-intellectual-work-and-standardized-tests-conflict-or-coexistence>

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, [http://metproject.org/downloads/MET\\_Gathering\\_Feedback\\_Research\\_Paper.pdf](http://metproject.org/downloads/MET_Gathering_Feedback_Research_Paper.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>The ELA and math results posted in July 2010 and described above reflected revised proficiency cut scores on existing, pre-Common Core tests. In contrast, tests administered in 2013 and thereafter are new and specifically built to measure the Common Core.

performance on the aspirational graduation rate measures and NAEP scores described above. In other words, **New York State, for the first time, will be reporting student grade-level expectations against a trajectory of college- and career-readiness as measured by tests fully reflective of the Common Core and, as a result, the number of students who score at or above grade level expectations will likely decrease.** States that have already begun to implement Common Core tests (such as Kentucky) have seen this change in student performance.

The change in the statewide number of students meeting or exceeding grade-level Common Core expectations is necessary if we are to be transparent and honest about what our students know and can do as they progress towards college and career readiness. Student scores on the Common Core assessments will not be directly comparable to scores from prior-year tests because the assessments are based on different, more rigorous standards. As such, **the number of students meeting or exceeding Common Core grade-level expectations should not necessarily be interpreted as a decline in student learning or as a decline in educator performance.** Instead, the results from these new assessments will give educators, parents, policymakers, and the public a more realistic picture of where students are on their path to being well prepared for the world that awaits them after they graduate from high school.

### **Institutional Accountability**

As was done when revised cut scores were used to calculate proficiency rates in 2010, NYSED anticipates approaching the transition year for Institutional Accountability by posting Common Core proficiency rates publicly (statewide results, by student subgroup, and by school/district), but also seeking approval from the United States Education Department to make statistical adjustments that approximate the previous definition of “proficiency” when making Adequate Yearly Progress determinations and other accountability decisions, such as the identification of Local Assistance Plan and Reward Schools. **It is important to note that no new districts will be identified as Focus Districts and no new schools will be identified as Priority Schools based on 2012-13 assessment results.** Priority and Focus Schools and Focus Districts were identified, consistent with New York State’s approved Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waiver, (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/accountability/ESEAFlexibilityWaiver.html>) based on 2010-11 school year data, prior to the changes in the tests.

### **Teacher/Principal Accountability**

New York’s new evaluation system holds teachers and principals accountable for their students’ learning using multiple measures of effectiveness, including student growth and/or achievement on State tests. Teachers whose students take the Grades 4-8 ELA and math State assessments and the principals of these teachers will receive State-provided growth scores. These growth calculations will be based on students’ scores on the 2012-13 State assessments compared to those of students who had

similar scores on the 2011-12 State tests and up to two prior years of tests (where available), taking into consideration certain student demographic characteristics.

We have consulted with the vendor that developed the State-provided growth model, and **we expect that the State-provided growth scores will result in similar proportions of educators earning each rating category (Highly Effective, Effective, Developing, and Ineffective) in 2012-13 compared to 2011-12, despite the anticipated lower percentage of students who score at grade level against a trajectory of college- and career-readiness as measured by tests fully reflective of the Common Core.** This is in large part because the State's student growth model takes into consideration changes in student performance compared to "similar" students (i.e., students with similar characteristics and academic histories). Therefore, all educators will have a fair chance to do well, regardless of the changing rigor of the test.

For other educators without State-provided growth measures and for districts using locally-selected measures of student achievement that rely on year-to-year changes in scores or "percent of students proficient" on State assessments, districts must take steps, as appropriate, to ensure that such measures reflect district goals and expectations for student performance on the new, more rigorous State assessments. NYSED anticipates providing districts with additional guidance on this issue later this school year.

As always, employment decisions rest with school districts and charter schools. Information gathered from each measure of educator effectiveness should be used thoughtfully, consistent with each district's approved evaluation plan. Districts should take into consideration, where appropriate, that 2012-13 is the first year when student progress was assessed against new and more rigorous learning standards.

### **Student Accountability**

Students will not be adversely affected by changes to the design of State tests. New Common Core Regents exams will be phased in over the next few years, and the transition will occur over time and in ways that ensure all students have the opportunity to meet graduation requirements. Similarly, **we expect that local policies and practices will balance the need for increased rigor against legitimate student expectations for access to educational programs, including local promotion and admission policies.**

### **Parent and Family Engagement**

The changes envisioned with the implementation of the Common Core will be possible only to the extent that true ongoing partnerships are developed with our students and their parents and families. Parents and families are the primary shareholders of our educational enterprise and customers of our services, and the role of parents and families extends far beyond simply supporting and reinforcing lessons initiated by teachers in the classroom. Parents and families must understand the

demands and opportunities of the Common Core, not only in order to know what to do to support our work, but also to know what to expect and demand of us to make sure tax dollars and local resources are effective investments that prepare children for their chosen pathways.

Schools and districts must help parents understand more than just the fact that curricula and assessments are changing in design and rigor. Parents need to understand the reasons why 45 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the Common Core State Standards (<http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states>). These Standards, for the first time, offer rigorous and researched-based learning benchmarks that help teachers guide students in their grade-by-grade progression toward college and careers readiness. When parents have a broader sense of the importance of this work, they will be more engaged as partners and better prepared to support the progress of their children.

The Common Core Toolkit for Parents and Families is a collection of materials and resources (<http://engageny.org/parent-and-family-resources>) that will help parents and families understand the Common Core itself and New York State Common Core implementation. We encourage schools and districts to use these resources when reaching out to parents on this important work. In particular, everything needed to plan a training or series of trainings to help parents understand the Common Core standards can be found at <http://engageny.org/resource/planning-a-parent-workshop-toolkit-for-parent-engagement>. This page includes planning tools, documents, and agendas to help prepare for and conduct a successful Common Core parent night. Parents and students need to understand these changes in order to be our partners in this important and challenging work. On behalf of our children and their families, I thank you for the work that you do and your partnership in ensuring that all of our students are college- and career-ready.

## **Summary**

- The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) allow states to share a common definition of readiness at each grade level by working backward based on the demands of college and careers. This progression of student readiness is one of the central principles of the standards. If students are to graduate high school fully prepared, they must meet the benchmarks set by the Common Core – at every grade and in every classroom. It is to these benchmarks that we must now teach. It is student mastery of these benchmarks that we must now assess.
- 2012-13 Grades 3-8 Assessments:
  - New York State, for the first time, will be reporting student grade-level expectations against a trajectory of college- and career-readiness as measured by tests fully reflective of the Common Core and, as a result, the number of students who score at or above grade level expectations will likely decrease.



- The number of students meeting or exceeding Common Core grade-level expectations should not necessarily be interpreted as a decline in student learning or as a decline in educator performance. Instead, the results from these new assessments will give educators, parents, policymakers, and the public a more realistic picture of where students are on their path to being well prepared for the world that awaits them after they graduate from high school.
- It is important to note that no new districts will be identified as Focus Districts and no new schools will be identified as Priority Schools based on 2012-13 assessment results.
- We have consulted with the vendor that developed the State-provided growth model, and we expect that the State-provided growth scores will result in similar proportions of educators earning each rating category (Highly Effective, Effective, Developing, and Ineffective) in 2012-13 compared to 2011-12, despite the anticipated lower percentage of students who score at grade level against a trajectory of college- and career-readiness as measured by tests fully reflective of the Common Core.
- We expect that local policies and practices will balance the need for increased rigor against legitimate student expectations for access to educational programs, including local promotion and admission policies.
- The Common Core Toolkit for Parents and Families is a collection of materials and resources (<http://engageny.org/parent-and-family-resources>) that will help parents and families understand the Common Core itself and New York State Common Core implementation.